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Webster May Face More Senate Questions

By Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writer

Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.) of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence is expected to decide today whether to recall FBI Director William H. Webster for more questioning about his qualifications to become director of the Central Intelligence Agency, congressional sources said.

A committee member said Boren, who has been polling the committee to determine how many members have more questions they want answered, believes there is "at least a 50-50 chance for one more concluding public session" with Webster, who was nominated March 3 by President Reagan to become CIA director.

Boren, along with most other committee members, expects Webster will be confirmed, sources said. He hopes to complete committee action "within the week," a source said, and "have a vote within two weeks."

A source close to Webster said negotiations are under way with the committee in hopes of avoiding another public session and Webster believes he can answer all questions in writing or in private meetings.

Senators want to discuss with Webster the numerous references in FBI files to Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, the fired National Security Council aide—particularly North's counterterrorism role while he was on the NSC staff.

Webster had been expected to breeze through the confirmation process. He was selected after the president's initial choice to succeed former CIA director William J. Casey, acting CIA Director Robert M. Gates, withdrew his nomination in the face of committee questions about his and the agency's role during the Iran-contra affair.

As with Gates, however, the nearly two-month hold on Webster's nomination is rooted in Senate caution about what may develop about Webster or the FBI in the Iran-contra congressional hearings, scheduled to begin May 5.

Webster and the FBI reportedly believe they are able to answer all these questions satisfactorily and are concerned about any additional delays in the confirmation process. In addition, Webster is scheduled to be interviewed this week by the Iran-contra congressional committees. "The question is when are we going to get a new CIA director and they need one now," the source said.

WILLIAM H. WEBSTER
. . . CIA director nominee

FBI witnesses have been questioned by congressional investigators about their part in a 1985 investigation run by the U.S. attorney's office in Miami into alleged illegal gunrunning to the Nicaraguan rebels, according to congressional sources. On April 17, a spokesman said FBI officials were looking into press allegations that a Miami agent gave memos about that 1985 case to North.

Independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh is examining whether North or other administration officials obstructed justice by interfering with the FBI investigations into whether there were Neutrality Act violations by Americans who were aiding the White House-directed contra resupply network.

One such inquiry was begun by the FBI last Oct. 8, after an arms-carrying C123 aircraft with Americans aboard was shot down over Nicaragua. Webster told the committee in his first appearance that on that day North called FBI Assistant Director Oliver B. Revell to tell him that Southern Air Transport Inc., a company that serviced the C123, was involved in the Iranian hostage situation.

Webster told the committee he did nothing at that time about Southern Air but was never asked to explain how Revell responded. Southern Air, according to sources, was never visited by the FBI after Oct. 8 until the Iran-contra affair became public in late November.

On Oct. 30, Attorney General Edwin Meese III asked Webster to delay any inquiry that involved Southern Air because of its role in an upcoming release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon. Webster complied with that request after being told by a subordinate the requested delay would not harm the inquiry, which was then nearly finished.

Webster's two earlier days of public testimony, on April 8 and April 9, primarily focused on his handling of an Oct. 30, 1986, confidential internal FBI memorandum about fund-raising for the contras that a Justice Department official said should not be sent to the White House to prevent North from seeing it. The Justice official noted that North might become the object of a criminal inquiry arising out of the contra operations.

The memo was sent to Webster on the same day he was called by a Meese deputy and asked to delay any action about Southern Air, but Webster told the senators he did not read the memo until the next day.

Committee member Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) questioned Webster repeatedly about why he did not see a connection between the Oct. 30 memo and the Meese request of the same day to hold up the FBI inquiry. He also pressed Webster to explain why he did not recall the memo and the request when the attorney general told him three weeks later he was going to review conflicting White House stories after the Iranian arms shipments became public.

The Senate panel also was concerned that the controversial FBI internal document, which involved the private contra funding network, was given to the committee by Walsh and not by the FBI.

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At a closed session with committee members on April 9, Webster provided additional data—including a confidential FBI file on the Iranian arms deal that had been kept by lower-echelon bureau officials without the director's knowledge.

When the closed session ended, Boren and Vice Chairman William S. Cohen (R-Maine) believed the members had satisfied themselves about Webster and the Iran-contra affair, sources said.

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